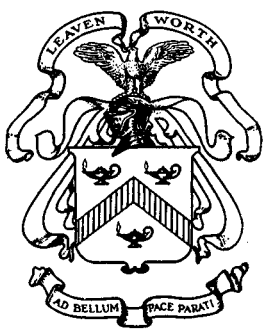
MODERN WARFARE

A French View of Counterinsurgency

by

Roger Trinquier



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Roger Trinquier

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With an Introduction by BERNARD B. FALL

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A Portrait of the "Centurion"

by BERNARD B. FALL

In a book that became one of France's greatest best sellers since World War II, Jean Lartéguy gave the name of "centurion" to the hard-bitten French regular who had survived the Indochina war, had learned his Mao Tse-tung the hard way, and later had sought to apply his lessons in Algeria or even in mainland France.*

Of that centurion—as the reader no doubt knows, this was the title of the company commanders who formed the backbone of the Roman Legions—Lartéguy says: "I shall always feel attached to those men, even if I should ever disagree with the course they choose to follow, [and] dedicate this book to the memory of all the centurions who perished so that Rome might survive."

Rome, of course, did *not* survive in its ancient splendor in spite of the incredible sacrifices of the centurions, nor did France survive as a world-wide empire. But in the case of France, the centurion exists as a live human being; right at this moment, he is either emerging from colonelcy to general's rank, or being placed on the compulsory retirement list—or, perhaps, being sentenced to the jails of the French Republic for Secret Army activities. For at least another decade, he and his kind are likely to exert a strong

* Jean Lartéguy, *The Centurions* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1961; New York: Avon Book Corp., 1962 [paperback]).

influence upon French military thinking and planning and, therefore, upon the Western alliance as a whole.

The French Army officer, to a far greater extent than his British-American counterpart, has spent the last quarter of a century fighting desperate rear-guard actions against highly politicized irregulars. In addition, the lack of coherent political leadership from Paris in the chaotic years of the Fourth Republic left the French military with a heavy burden of making political decisions at every level. Local commanders, for example, had to make the decision whether or not to arm local levies and if so, of what political or religious persuasion. In Indochina, such officers—often of captain's rank or lower—raised Catholic, Buddhist, Cao-Dai, Hoa-Hao, or mountain tribal militia forces whenever they did not use outright river pirates or deserters from the Communists. In return for such military assistance by the natives, those officers undertook *political* commitments of a far-reaching nature: They swore solemn oaths to protect either a given group from Communist reprisals or a given territory whose population had committed itself to them. From a purely tactical involvement, the war (both in Indochina and Algeria, but even more in the latter) became a highly personal involvement. An officer who would, under normal circumstances, have abandoned a given position for tactical reasons felt compelled to hold it because he himself had "promised" to hold it—and promised not his own superiors, but the people among whom he fought.

To withdraw became not only proof of military failure, but—and this above all—a blemish on one's personal honor as an "officer and a gentleman." To the Anglo-American mind, which sees its officers as Colonel Blimps and General Jubilation T. Cornpones (or their real-life counterparts of the retired extreme right-wing variety), this view of war

seems inconceivable. And it is, of course, inconceivable in conventional war, where it is perfectly permissible to lose or win a terrain feature without losing one's military honor. The "I shall return" of General MacArthur amply redeemed the surrender of Corregidor; the Inchon landing, the bloody retreat to Pusan beachhead. But in such conventional wars (Trinquier calls them "traditional," to emphasize their obsoleteness), military operations go on without regard for the hapless civilian population. No one asks it to take sides in the struggle—at any rate, not at first, while the battle rages.

In revolutionary war (or, as Trinquier calls it throughout the book, italicizing the term for emphasis, "*modern warfare*"), the allegiance of the civilian population becomes one of the most vital objectives of the whole struggle. This is indeed the key message that Trinquier seeks to impress upon his reader: Military tactics and hardware are all well and good, but they are really quite useless if one has lost the confidence of the population among whom one is fighting.

And Roger Trinquier is extremely well qualified to write on this subject, for his own background makes him the perfect example of the scholarly warrior of peasant stock that is a vanishing breed in the other Western armies. (In all likelihood, Communist China's armies still have a few in their ranks, not the least of whom is Mao Tse-tung.) Trinquier was born in 1908 in La Beaume, a small mountain village in the French Alps where he still owns a home and spends his vacations. Until the age of thirteen, he went to the one-room village school. Because he was a bright student, his parents directed him toward what was then the most obvious path to social betterment for the son of a poor farmer—schoolteaching. He successfully passed the entrance examinations to the Normal School

of Aix-en-Provence and graduated at the age of twenty, ready for a lifetime of teaching in the back country of southeastern France.

But like all other Frenchmen his age, he first had to put in his two years of compulsory military service. Since it is still a French saying that the schoolteachers make up the backbone of the French Army's reserve officers' corps, it was not surprising that Trinquier was sent to Reserve Officers' School. Although most schoolteachers consider their military career a necessary evil, Trinquier thought it a revelation of a vaster, more active world. He requested a transfer to the Officers' School of Saint-Maixent, then graduated, in 1931, into the French Marine Infantry; and since the French Marines (they were known as "Colonials" from 1870 until 1961, but have now taken on their old name again) were specifically trained for overseas duty, the young lieutenant soon found himself on a trip to the Far East.

His first assignment, as was the rule then, was probably his toughest: He found himself in command of an outpost at Chi-Ma, in the wildest and most isolated part of the Sino-Tonkinese border region, aptly called the "One Hundred Thousand Mountains," fighting Chinese pirates and opium smugglers. To stay alive there, one had to rely on native help, and Trinquier quickly learned how to find it. He also learned some of the mountaineer dialects. Upon his return to France in 1937, he was picked for another delicate assignment, as a member of the French Marine force guarding the International Concession in Shanghai, where Japan's aggression had just unleashed World War II. Trinquier was then reassigned to the command of one of the two Marine companies guarding the French Embassy in Peking. Other major powers—the United States, Britain, Italy, and Japan—also had units in the diplomatic enclave. Trinquier became very friendly with the American com-

mander, Colonel Marstone, and he also learned Chinese.

When World War II officially broke out in Europe, in September, 1939, Trinquier was transferred back to Shanghai as deputy to the French battalion commander there. Pearl Harbor and its aftermath created an anomalous situation: Although the British and American units in Shanghai were disarmed and interned by the Japanese, the French—because they were under the nominal control of the Vichy Government in German-occupied France—were left unmolested and fully armed. The Japanese, however, did not trust the Vichy forces indefinitely; having overwhelmed them in Indochina, on March 9, 1945, they did likewise in Shanghai on the following day, whereupon Trinquier got a taste of Japanese imprisonment. (The existence of the French units in China was to lead, in at least one instance, to a rather comical situation after V-J Day: When American Marines in full battle gear went ashore near Tientsin, they were greeted by a French Marine detachment that presented arms to them. It was part of the nearby Peking garrison that had picked up its weapons again after the Japanese surrender.)

Promoted to the rank of captain in 1942 by the Vichy Government, Trinquier, like most of his comrades in neighboring Indochina, neither broke with Vichy nor sought to join General de Gaulle's Free French Forces—a fact that was later to affect his career decisively. His promotions were to come slowly, and the mutual distrust (more often, dislike) between the Free French officers and those who, though sympathetic to the Allied cause, had remained faithful to their soldier's oath—or so they were to rationalize it—never quite disappeared. It explains Trinquier's strong animosity toward de Gaulle, which he does not bother to hide and which comes through quite clearly in his political statements.

Liberated from the Japanese after V-J Day, Trinquier,

like many of his comrades, sought an assignment in Indochina—perhaps as a demonstration that his wartime allegiance was dictated by motives other than fear of battle. Arriving in Saigon on January 3, 1946, he became a platoon commander in the commando group of Major Ponchardier, which had been given the difficult task of clearing Vietminh elements out of the swamps and rice paddies surrounding the city. Upon his return to France, however, Trinquier learned that, like other officers who had remained faithful to Vichy, he was to be dismissed from the service. But since a senior officer who had known him when he was a young second lieutenant at Chi-Ma intervened in his behalf, Captain Trinquier was assigned, on February 1, 1947, to Tarbes and Pau, where the French airborne training center had been created. (The officer who had saved Trinquier's career was himself an old "Indochina hand," General Raoul Salan, later commander-in-chief in Indochina and Algeria. In 1961 he was to lead the revolt against General de Gaulle's Algerian policies; caught and convicted of attempting to overthrow the French Republic, Salan is now serving a life sentence in a French military prison.)

On November 14, 1947, Trinquier again landed in Indochina as second-in-command of the Ist Colonial Parachute Battalion, whose command he was to assume in September, 1948, after its commander had been killed in action. Promoted to the rank of major, Trinquier and his unit participated in the grim inch-by-inch clearing operations on the Plain of Reeds—he was to parachute into it four times—and in southern Central Vietnam. Those are exactly the same areas in which Vietnamese troops and their American advisers are heavily involved today.

After another tour of duty in France as commander of the Commando Training Center in Fréjus and of the Colo-

nial Paratroop School, Trinquier returned to Indochina in December, 1951, to take over a brand-new service just created by Marshal Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, France's best commander-in-chief in the Far East. (Regrettably, he was to die of cancer within a year.) De Lattre had decided to turn the Vietminh's skill in fighting behind the lines against the Vietminh itself by implanting anti-Communist guerrillas deep inside the enemy's territory. In view of his knowledge of the northern hill areas and tribal groups, Trinquier was selected as the leader for the northern operations; his first efforts were soon crowned with success, for contact team after contact team was dropped into enemy territory, and, contrary to expectations, most managed to survive and fight.

When Trinquier's methods became known to the American military advisers in Saigon, he was invited to visit American antiguerrilla-training centers in Korea and Japan. Two young American officers also returned with him to Indochina to learn from his operations, and American equipment for his guerrilla units became readily available. By mid-1951, Major Trinquier received command of all behind-the-lines operations in Indochina, and his units became officially known as GCMA, or Groupements de Commandos Mixtes Aéroportés (Composite Airborne Commando Groups), a name that was changed, in December, 1953, to GMI (Groupement Mixte d'Intervention, or Composite Intervention Group), when their mission was extended beyond airborne commando operations.

By late 1953, almost 20,000 men were under his command—probably the largest unit ever commanded by an army major—and engaged in operations covering several thousand square miles of enemy territory. Native tribesmen were flocking to his maquis in greater numbers than could be armed and trained; but before he could make

full use of them, what Trinquier—in a masterly understatement—calls "the regrettable Dien Bien Phu incident" ended the Indochina war. What followed was a horrible debacle: Thousands of partisans had to be abandoned to the enemy, since the stipulations of the Geneva cease-fire of 1954 did not permit the French to continue to supply them.

Trinquier asserts that he had asked the United States, which had not signed the cease-fire agreement, to continue to supply the guerrillas, but that his request had been turned down. Although the partisans and their French cadres fought on long beyond the cease-fire, they were eventually wiped out one by one.* In his final operations report (which I found in some forgotten archives in Paris), Trinquier could not help but show some of his deep feelings about his abandoned men:

> The total suppression of logistical support . . . will bring in its wake the progressive liquidation of our [infiltrated] elements. There is little hope of seeing the leaders of our maquis escape the "clemency" of President Ho Chi Minh.
>
> As of August 15, 1954, fifteen enemy regular battalions, fifteen regional battalions and seventeen regional companies are now committed against them. Ceasing operations as per orders at the very moment when they were about to triumph, our maquis, undefeated on the field of battle, have been offered up for sacrifice.
>
> While the [GCMA] command has, with discipline, accepted the sacrifice of the maquis, it no longer feels morally authorized to ask its partisans to remain at our disposal.
>
> In this bloodthirsty adventure, their only consolation remains the pride of having won the last successes of that campaign, and of having created a veritable popular uprising against the Vietminh.

* For a more detailed description of GCMA operations, see Bernard Fall, *Street Without Joy: Indochina at War, 1946-1963* (3d rev. ed.; Harrisburg: Stackpole, 1963).

During those decisive years in Indochina, Trinquier began to study in depth the principles of "modern warfare," of which the pages that follow will give a detailed account, but the years of combat in Algeria that were to follow probably added a political dimension that was heretofore lacking in him. Assigned as a lieutenant-colonel to the 10th Parachute Division of General Massu (another old Indochina hand), he narrowly missed the Suez invasion of 1956—another perfect illustration, from his point of view, of the frustration by politics of what seemed to be a "sound" military operation—and found himself assigned, with all the other units of the 10th, to clearing the town of Algiers of all terrorists. Bomb- and grenade-throwing in Algiers had, in 1957, become an everyday occurrence, against which the regular police was all but powerless.

Massu, Trinquier, and the camouflage-clad paratroopers of the 10th "waded" into the situation with a cold ferocity that made headlines throughout the world and provided Lartéguy's *The Centurions* with its choicest passages. It also provided Trinquier with a Cartesian rationale for the use of torture in revolutionary war; torture is the particular bane of the terrorist, just as antiaircraft artillery is that of the airman or machine-gun fire that of the foot soldier. Trinquier's methods won the day in Algiers; but the dying Fourth Republic felt that it could not afford to let him remain much longer in the public eye, and Trinquier temporarily went to command the French Airborne Center at Pau.

But his old protector, General Salan, soon recalled him to Algeria to become the commander of the 3d Colonial Airborne Regiment. That unit took on the onerous task of sealing off the Tunisian border south of the "Morice Line"—the electronic 300-kilometer-long fence constructed by the French Army from the Mediterranean to the desert—along

its Saharan fringe. As Trinquier was to describe in detail in another book,* he found himself by accident rather than design in the Algiers area when the May 13, 1958, putsch in Algiers led to the return of General de Gaulle to power, but he nevertheless took an important part in establishing the famous Public Safety Committee of Algiers.

Soon in disagreement with de Gaulle's policies, he returned to the command of his regiment to participate in the mop-up operations of the "Challe Plan," named after the new commander-in-chief, Air Force General Challe. Between July, 1959, and March, 1960, the 3d Airborne, in a series of relentless pursuits, broke the Algerian nationalists' hold on one of the most difficult areas in Algeria, El Milia. Militarily, the end seemed in sight, but, internationally, pressures had begun to build up against France. The Algerian war was expensive, all the newly independent nations were turning against France, and even her own allies no longer voted with her in the United Nations. In a history-making "tour of the officers' messes" (*"la tournée des popotes"*) in March, 1960, de Gaulle explained to his officers in Algeria that, inevitably, the country would achieve independence.

To the new generation of technicians of revolutionary warfare, that political solution was abhorrent. Not swayed by the international implications of the situation, they believed that to abandon Algeria when military victory seemed so near for the first time would be not only another rank betrayal of a personal commitment but also a direct condemnation of their methods of combat. The reaction that set in was to lead many of them out of the army and into prison—and a few to the firing squad.

Trinquier himself was, beyond a doubt, saved by circumstances. While the Algerian storm was brewing, he

* Roger Trinquier, *Le coup d'état du 13 mai* (Paris: Editions l'Esprit Nouveau, 1963).

had been recalled from his command to help President Moise Tshombe of Katanga Province organize his white-cadred forces. He had arrived in Elisabethville on January 25, 1961; he was expelled from Katanga on March 9, under Belgian and U.N. pressure. He was in Athens writing up his recommendations for Katanga when most of his former associates became involved, on April 21, 1961, in the abortive "generals' mutiny" in Algiers. His army career, at best, was finished, and his request to be put on the retired list met with no opposition.

But Trinquier seems to have found a new avocation in political writing and lecturing, which may indicate that he has certain political ambitions for the future. It would be difficult to classify him by American standards as *radically* "right wing," for his acquaintance with Mao leads him to accept the need for social reforms as an instrument in defeating Communism. In his recent writings, however, he has attacked what he considers to be the high-handed methods of the Fifth Republic in the field of civil liberties; yet his own writings clearly show that he would not shrink from using the same methods, if necessary, himself.

To be sure, the informed reader will find in the following pages much that will shock him or that will strike him as incredible. In many cases, Trinquier, like any other person who is certain he holds the key to absolute truth, underplays the difficulties some of his counterinsurgency measures are likely to raise and encounter or neglects to explain all the failures satisfactorily. For example, although it is true that the GCMA's tied down a Vietminh force three times their own size during the battle of Dien Bien Phu, they never succeeded in seriously hampering Communist supply lines to the besieged fortress. Likewise, there has never been solid evidence to prove that a real effort was made—as Trinquier advocates here—to infiltrate counterguerrilla maquis into Tunisia to attack Algerian

bases; or that such maquis, if they ever existed, were successful.

But on the other hand, American readers—particularly those who are concerned with today's operations in South Vietnam—will find to their surprise that their various seemingly "new" counterinsurgency gambits, from strategic hamlets to large-scale pacification, are mere rehashes of old tactics to which helicopters, weed killers, and rapid-firing rifles merely add a new dimension of speed and bloodiness without basically changing the character of the struggle—nor its outcome, if the same *political* errors that the French have made are repeated. And the careers of Trinquier and of his numerous comrades still in the French Army prove that France has an ample reserve of counterinsurgency specialists whose qualifications are second to none.

It is, once again, Lartéguy who brings into sharp focus that type of soldier, when one of his key characters, just such a revolutionary-warfare colonel, jokingly states that France should have two armies—one with "lovely guns" and "distinguished and doddering generals," and the other "composed entirely of young enthusiasts in camouflaged battle dress, who would not be put on display, but from whom impossible efforts would be demanded. . . ." To which another character answers with a warning: "You're heading for a lot of trouble."

But the trouble into which a regular army must inevitably—perhaps fatally—run when it is committed to a long string of revolutionary wars is only dimly perceived in America so far. Colonel Trinquier's book should do much to serve as a timely warning.

Alexandria, Virginia
October, 1963